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AUTHOR Herman, Joan L.; Yeh, Jennie P.
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ABSTRACT

Although parent involvement has become a focal concern of American schools, little research has investigated the effects of involving parents in education. Data from the California's Early Childhood Education (ECE) program was analyzed to examine the relationships between various aspects of parent involvement and their effects on parent satisfaction, teacher satisfaction, and student achievement. The principals, teachers, and parents of students in two second-grade and two third-grade classrooms in each ECE school were the subjects for the study. In 72 schools chosen for more intensive study, criterion-referenced reading and mathematics tests were also administered to students. Parent involvement variables investigated the parents' communications with the school, awareness of school operations, participation in school activities, influence in school decision-making, and relationships with teachers. Results indicated that parent involvement in schools was beneficial; the degree of parent interest and participation in school activities was positively related to student achievement. Parents' perceptions of their influence in decision-making and the perceived quality of parent-teacher relationships were positively related to parent satisfaction. A negative relationship was found between the amount of school-home communication and student achievement. (NRB)

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SOME EFFECTS OF PARENT INVOLVEMENT IN SCHOOLS

Joan L. Herman

Jennie P. Yeh

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Center for the Study of Evaluation
Graduate School of Education, UCLA
Los Angeles, California 90024

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Introduction*

The conception of the role that parents should play in public education has undergone a dramatic shift in the last decade. In the not-too-distant past, the parents' role in public schools consisted mainly of (1) dropping their children off at the door of the school, and (2) voting for bond issues (Gordon, 1971). With the advent of the 1965 Elementary and Secondary Education Act, however, parents have been asked to assume a more direct role in their children's formal education. Parent involvement, in fact, has become a focal concern of American schools.

There are a number of reasons why parent involvement has become such a pervasive idea. Apart from notions of democracy and the legitimate rights of parents to exert influence in a domain where their children spend a significant portion of their lives. This is a time of parental disenchantment with public education. With the escalation of the accountability movement, parent involvement may be used as a method to defuse parental criticism and mollify public concern. From a more positive perspective, however, parent involvement may contribute to increased support for the school, providing ammunition for possible battles with other bureaucracies and in the ever-present and important matter of bond issues. Parent involvement at schools can also provide valuable additional resources for school operations in terms, for example, of volunteer time and other "free" services they may render. Parent involvement might be expected, too, to influence positively students' school success; that is, by being involved, parents can become more familiar with their

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children's formal education, and better able to reinforce at home the principles and concepts of that process. Finally, parent participation in planning may help schools formulate programs more suited to the needs of their children.

There are, then, practical and theoretical reasons supporting the concept of parent involvement, and legislators have apparently heeded these arguments by mandating parent involvement in the affairs of schools (e.g., California's School Improvement Program, ESEA Title I). However, despite the increasing trend toward parent involvement and the extensive rhetoric extolling its virtues, there has been little research or evaluation investigating the effects of involving parents in the education process. The data set collected as part of the Center for the Study of Evaluation's 1976 study of the effects of California's Early Childhood Education (ECE) program provided the opportunity for such an investigation.

Because parent involvement and participation represented a major component in the ECE program, a variety of data about this area was collected. This data allowed us to examine the relationships among various aspects of parent involvement and their effects on parent satisfaction, teacher satisfaction, and student achievement. Aspects of parent involvement studied included parent-school communication, parent awareness of school operations and events, parent participation in school activities, parent influence in school decision-making, and parent-teacher relationships. Socioeconomic status was also included so that its effects on involvement could be analyzed. Two principal

questions guided the study: (1) Is parent involvement positively related to school outcomes? (2) What is the relationship between various activities associated with parent involvement in schools?

Methods

Subjects and sampling. The data used in the study was a subset of that collected during a recent comprehensive evaluation of California's Early Childhood Education Program (Baker, 1976). Two hundred fifty-six schools were selected to participate in that study to represent three levels of ECE status (0, 2, and 3 years) and four levels of compensatory education funding (receipt and nonreceipt of federal and/or state level funding) based on a stratified random selection procedure. Two second-grade and two third-grade classrooms in each of these 256 schools were randomly selected for study. Teachers and a sample of parents in each of these classrooms, as well as the school principal were the subjects of data collection. In addition, from within the 256-school sample, 72 schools were chosen for more intensive study. In these schools, criterion-referenced reading and mathematics tests were administered to students in the selected second and third-grade classrooms.

Independent variables. Each of the parent involvement variables studied was a composite indicator based on several items from principal, parent and/or teacher questionnaires:

School-home communication measured the relative magnitude of school-home contacts. This composite indicator included teacher reports of both the number of parent-teacher conferences and the number of written reports provided to parents about their children's progress during

the year; and principal reports of both the number of parent education sessions offered to parents at the school, and the amount of time spent in principal-parent conferences. Responses from each source were standardized over all schools, and an average standard score was computed for each school.

Parent awareness of school operations measured the extent to which parents were knowledgeable and cognizant about their children's school. It was computed as the average amount of agreement between parent and principal reports of the number of parent education sessions provided for parents, the number of written reports provided to parents regarding their children's progress, the number of parent-teacher conferences during the year, and whether or not parents could describe parent training sessions. Average parent awareness was aggregated at both the school and classroom levels.

Parent influence reflected parents' perceptions of their influence on a 1-4 scale, in the following areas of school decision-making: choosing learning goals, planning learning activities, deciding how money is spent, choosing school staff, and evaluating school programs. Average ratings were aggregated at the school and classroom levels.

Parent participation captured the extent to which parents were interested and involved in school functions. It was computed as the sum of standard scores on principal's reports of the number of volunteers, number of volunteer hours, and number of parent visits to the school per school enrollment; parent reports of the number of activities they participated in at the school (e.g., aide, volunteer, PTA, attendance

at parent meetings); principal's reports of the amount of parent interest in the school; and teachers' perceptions of parent attendance at school events. This sum was then divided by the number of non-missing responses and the result aggregated at the school and classroom levels.

Teacher-parent relations was an average rating of parent reports of their comfort in coming to the school for an informal visit, and teacher perceptions of the importance of parent volunteers and their relationships with parent volunteers.

Socioeconomic status was a school level index provided by the State Department of Education based on parent occupations. The index ranges from 1-3.

Dependent variables. The dependent variables included both parent and teacher satisfaction with the school, and student achievement. Satisfaction indices were derived from teacher and parent questionnaire responses, and student achievement was based on criterion-referenced reading and mathematics tests.

Parent satisfaction was the average rating given by parents, on a 1-5 scale, of their level of satisfaction with their child's reading progress, mathematics progress, enjoyment of school, and self-concept in school. Average ratings were aggregated at the classroom level.

Student achievement was the sum of standardized classroom scores on criterion-referenced reading and mathematics tests. These measures were specially developed for the ECE Study to measure objectives that

were judged most important in the primary grade reading and mathematics curriculum.

Analyses. Path analyses was used to investigate the relationships among variables. Including socioeconomic status in the equations permitted some control for background facts and prior achievement.

Results and Discussion

Table 1 contains means and standard deviations for the variables included. The results of the path analysis are displayed in Figure 1, which shows the significant paths at alpha=.01. The prespecified model did not completely fit the data, but some interesting relationships did emerge. Although there were few relationships among aspects of parent involvement, four of the five parent involvement variables (parent awareness, school communication, parent participation, parent influence, and parent-teacher relationship) were significantly related to at least one outcome measure.

Is parent involvement positively related to school outcomes? The results suggest that parent involvement in schools is beneficial. The degree of parent interest and participation in school activities is positively related to student achievement. The amount of school-home communication is also indirectly related to achievement. With regard to parent satisfaction, both parents' perceptions of their influence in decision making and the perceived quality of parent teacher relationships are positively related to parent satisfaction.

The negative relationship between the amount of school-home communication and student achievement is contrary to expectation. This

TABLE 1

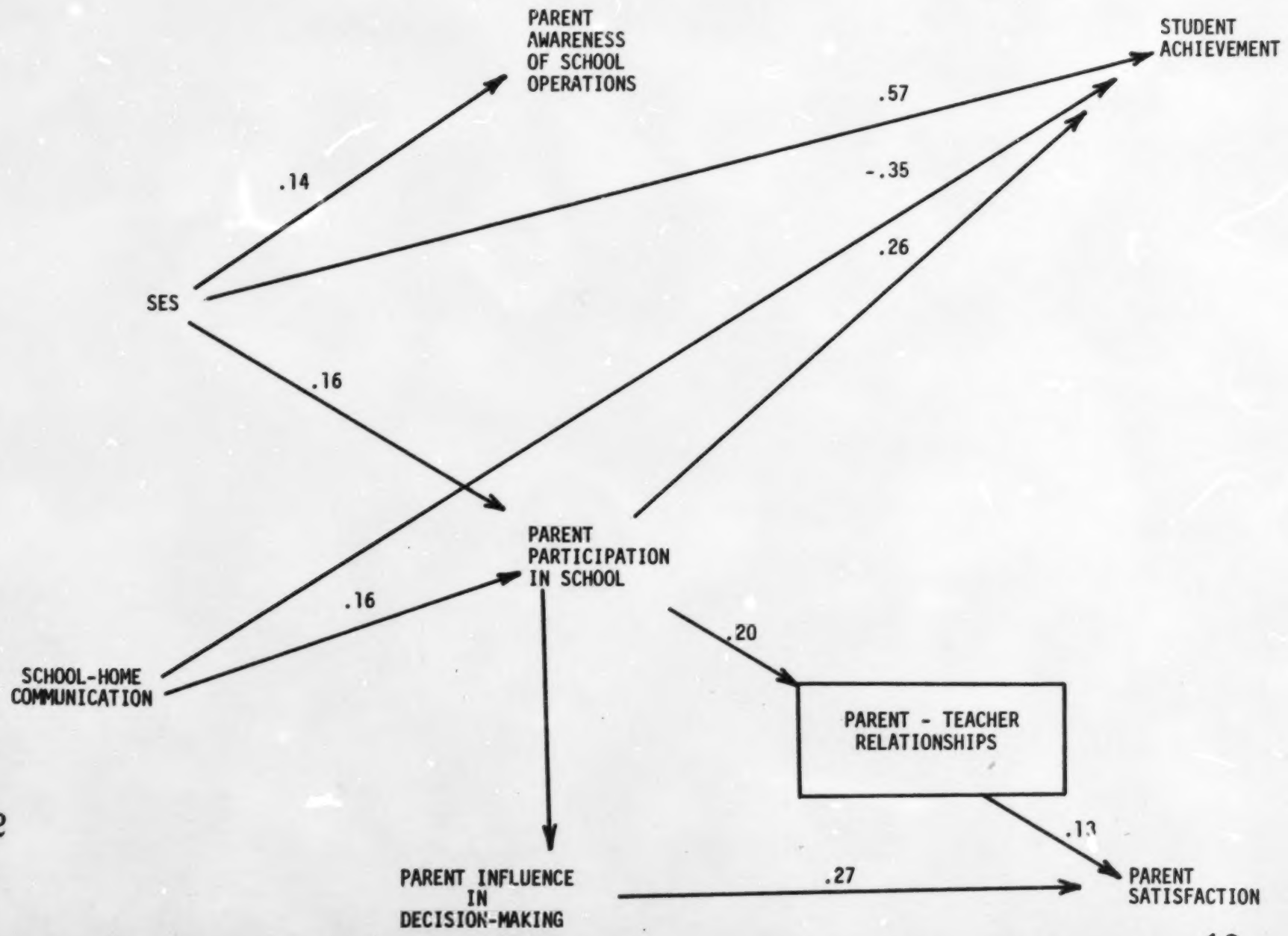
Descriptive Statistics of Path Analysis Variables

at both Classroom and School Levels

	Class Level			School Level		
Variables	$\bar{X}$	S.D.	N	$\bar{X}$	S.D.	N
School Communication	4.21	.70	680	-.008	.691	139
Parent Awareness	.704	.284	609	.705	.191	187
Parent Influence	2.580	.838	530	2.574	.571	184
Parent Participation	1.497	.687	750	1.533	.602	203
Teacher-Parent Relationships	4.156	1.325	738	4.150	.761	198
Socioeconomic Status	1.966	.475	809	1.974	.465	258
Parent Satisfaction	4.208	.700	611	4.216	.409	187
Teacher Satisfaction	3.677	1.018	399	3.804	.707	182
Student Achievement (Standardized Score)	-.040	1.94	144	0.000	1.94	72

Figure 1

THE EFFECTS OF PARENT INVOLVEMENT AT SCHOOL



finding, however, may imply that schools today are not very different those of the past in terms of when parents are called on, i.e., parents are called in for conferences and provided with written reports when their children are performing poorly.

What is the relationship among the various aspects of parent involvement? The findings indicate limited relationships. As would be expected, socioeconomic status is positively related to both parent participation in and awareness of school activities. Interestingly, however, socioeconomic status is not correlated to parents' perceptions of their influence in decision-making.

- School-home communication is positively related to parent participation.
- Parent participation in school activities is positively related to both perceptions of parent influences in school decision-making and quality of parent-teacher relationships.

Discussion and Conclusions

The study is highly exploratory; generalizations and inferences about causality naturally must be severely limited. The results do, however, suggest that involving parents in school affairs may indeed have tangible benefits, and raise possibilities of how these benefits might be maximized.

The results with regard to parent satisfaction imply that giving parents a voice in school decision-making and creating an environment where parents feel important and comfortable may indeed build support for the

school and/or diffuse parent criticism. The results also suggest that increasing parent participation in schools, by means of such things as volunteer activities, parent meetings, and back-to-school nights, may increase parents' perceptions of their influence on, and their feelings of being in rapport with, the school. Perhaps familiarity breeds satisfaction. In addition, giving parents some influence and involvement in the school program transfers some responsibility for the instructional program from school to parent. This transfer of responsibility may help the school program be more sensitive to students' needs and/or may give parents a greater stake in being satisfied, i.e., they share the blame for the source of the dissatisfaction.

The results also show that parent participation and interest in school activities has some direct benefits for student achievement. The "free" resources offered to schools in terms of volunteer time may enable schools to improve their instructional program and their attention to individual needs, which results in more student success in learning.

Parent participation therefore appears pivotal: it is positively related to both parent satisfaction and student achievement. How can participation be fostered? The results with regard to school communication imply that school outreach activities may be important. Perhaps when schools show concern for parents' needs for information, they are rewarded with more help and support for the schools. Opening up communication channels also, no doubt, increases parents' awareness of the involvement opportunities in schools.

The relationships found between socioeconomic status and other variables are not surprising, i.e., that parents of higher socioeconomic status are more involved in school activities and are more aware of school activities. What is surprising, however, is the lack of relationships in some areas. SES was found unrelated to either parent perceptions of their influence on, or their satisfaction with, the school. Since it has long been acknowledged that public education is least successful with deprived students, and popularly supposed that lower SES communities feel alienated from the school, this lack of relationship may again suggest that parent involvement is having an effect in mollifying public concern. Alternatively, it may mean that parents in lower SES schools expect less and are, therefore, satisfied with less in terms of their influence and their children's progress.

As with all exploratory research, the present findings suggest the need for additional information. For example, if parent participation influences student achievement, in what specific ways does it exert effect? How can the effects of parent involvements be optimized? How can participation best be encouraged? The results here are suggestive, but clearly alternative explanations could be raised. More definitive answers to these and other questions will need to be found before policy implications can be derived.

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